

An Evaluation of the New Interchange Series

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ABSTRACT: In language teaching and learning, textbooks can play a very important role. As Riazi (2002) stated, textbooks are the second effective factor in every classroom after the teacher. Therefore, choosing an appropriate textbook for a class has been one of the most essential tasks for teachers and curriculum planners. Thus, it is clear that evaluating a textbook is of great importance in order to achieve the desired objectives. In this paper, Littlejohn's framework (1998) is employed in this attempt with the aim of evaluating the New Interchange Series written by Richards, Hull and Proctor (2006). This framework evaluates theselected textbook regardless of how it is used in the classroom. In sum, the analysis indicated that the New Interchange Series don't employ learners or the teachers as a source for its content; rather, they pay attention mainly on pair works and meaning. They also encourage students to use the language, and more importantly they usually require them to talk and discuss rather than to be a listener. However, there were some parts, including retrieving, repetition and written extended discourse, that need to be taken into better consideration.

Key Words: Textbook Evaluation, New Interchange Series, Littlejohn's Framework

I. INTRODUCTION

Many people around the world try to learn English. And the number of speakers who learn it as first, second or foreign language are increasing in number. Its range of uses and adaptability to general and specific tasks are increasing everyday (Long, 2005). There are many factors, including the context, the teacher, the motivation and the facilities, that can influence the process of language learning. Among them, the role of textbooks in the process of learning is of great significance. Textbooks can not only shed light on the role of different people in the target society, but also the way different people at various levels of society express their intentions through utterances (Sahragard, Rahimi & Zaremoayedi, 2009). Textbooks are really crucial in today's realm of language teaching and learning since they are generally considered to be essential component of teaching and will therefore have a great impact on the teacher's methods of instruction (Long, 2005).

By entering any bookstores which sell English materials in Iran, we can realize that the New Interchange series are everywhere in the market. There are also a variety of other English textbooks and materials for English language learners, but by enrolling in a number of the language institutes in Iran, especially at intermediate to upper intermediate levels, it will be realized that the New Interchange series are still greatly popular in the language programs of institutes in Iran.

The new editions of the Interchange series are written by Richards, Hull and Proctor in 2006. The authors claimed that these books are communicative and task-based. They also mentioned that the textbooks include interesting topics, and they focus on both fluency and accuracy of the language simultaneously. These books are also considered to have a multi-skill syllabus, integrating ideas, structures, functions, vocabulary and pronunciation. The authors believe that the underlying notion of the course can be learned well when it is used for meaningful communication.

The present study investigated the claims of the authors by evaluating the New Interchange 3 book. The results of the evaluation will be beneficial for both English teachers and curriculum planners in many language institutes since it might give them information about the course book that they use and how they can employ it even more effectively.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Textbooks are educational tools for English teachers, and they must know not only how to employ it, but also how effectively it can be used. The great number of published materials for English language which are available in the bookstores may make the selection of the appropriate textbook a difficult task. Moreover,

choosing a particular textbook is related to an educational decision that there is considerable professional, financial, and even political investment (Sheldon, 1988). It is true that there are other aspects, including different teaching approaches, students' preferences or other environmental factors, that can have impact on the efficiency of textbooks; however, the impact of textbooks as instructional materials is more crucial as texts have the potential to modify the objectives of the situation or affect the students' motivation (Riazi & Mosallanejad, 2010)

Cunningsworth (1995) stated that textbooks have always not only been the maximum desired instructional material in teaching but are also considered as a source in attaining purposes in relation to the learners' requirements. Moreover, the other main role of textbooks is the availability of existing knowledge and the clarity to the learners in a preferred way. It is also pointed out that the role of the textbook is the interaction between the three components, including teacher, learners and materials which, in turn, contributes to assist learning processes (Allwright, 1981).

According to the different findings of the researches and the important role of textbooks in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, selecting a suitable textbook is a very important aspect in an educational program. Peacock (1997) also mentioned that textbooks are chosen haphazardly in various learning contexts. This is usually the result of the teachers' first impression, experience or in the best way is based on subjective judgment. Therefore, textbook evaluation as a dynamic process can indicate the appropriateness and the suitability of a textbook (Kafipour, Soori & Soury, 2011). Hutchinson and Waters believed that textbook evaluation is a process that matches the learners' needs according to the best and available solution (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987 cited in Sheldon, 1988).

On the other hand, Yarmohammadi (2002) evaluated the senior high school English textbooks based on a revised version of Tucker's model. He came to the conclusion that these textbooks suffer from a lot of shortcomings including: 1. They are not authentic; 2. English and Persian names are used interchangeably; and 3. Oral skills are ignored. At the end, some suggestions were proposed to remedy the shortcomings.

In a similar way, Jahangard (2007) evaluated the EFL textbooks that are being used in the Iranian high schools by the Ministry of Education. He discussed the merits and demerits of the textbooks with reference to 13 common criteria extracted from different material evaluation checklists. The criteria were as follows: explicitness of objectives, good vocabulary explanation and practice, educationally and socially acceptable approaches to the target community, periodic review and test sections, clear attractive layout, easy-to-read pages, appropriate visual materials, interesting topics and tasks, clear instructions, clearly organized and graded content, plenty of authentic language, good grammar presentation and practice, fluency practice in all four skills, and independent learning situations. The results of the study indicated that the Book Four had better features in comparison with the three other textbooks (which needed huge revisions and modifications).

Riazi and Aryashokouh (2007) also studied the four high schools and pre-university English textbooks, focusing on the consciousness-raising aspect of vocabulary exercises. They found that of all the exercises in the four books only one percent of them could be categorized as consciousness-raising. They also realized that the exercises mainly concentrated on individual words (approximately 26%) with no emphasis on fixed expressions, lexical collocations (approximately 15%) and grammatical collocations (approximately 2%). They concluded that students are mainly dealing with meanings of individual words and not with how the words are used with other words or in what combinations.

Hajar and Azizollah (2012) conducted a similar research study to assess the efficiency of the New Interchange course books and to check if they provide sufficient and comprehensible pragmatic input for Iranian learners of English. To this aim, they developed an oral discourse completion test for 50 students at upper intermediate level of proficiency. The gathered data indicated a high index of standard deviation which showed a large disparity in pragmatic knowledge of the learners. Moreover, the learners were able to answer to all speech situations using the information provided in their books; thus, they came to the conclusion that the books provided enough pragmatic input for language learners to cope with their basic communicative needs.

To put it briefly, it is also worth mentioning that the New Interchange Series consist of four books for young and adult learners from the beginning to the high-intermediate level. The New Interchange Series are selected since they have always been the most popular English textbooks in Iran, and also to investigate whether they are efficient enough to develop English skills among Iranian language learners.

III. THE STUDY

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 10 experienced teachers who were asked to give their ideas regarding the items of the evaluative checklists. The teachers of the study had already taught the textbooks under analysis, i.e. Interchange 3 (new edition), for at least two years each. Their teaching experience ranged from 7 to 10 years.

3.2. Instruments

To conduct the evaluation, some parts of the Littlejohn's (1998) checklist were employed to be answered by the 10 experienced teachers.

IV. ANALYSIS

In this part of the study, the gathered answers are summarized for each section of the framework. To understand better, some tables with frequencies and percentages are also mentioned.

I. Aims and objectives

The tasks in the Interchange 3 new edition pay special attention on the grammatical structures or other points related to form. Also, they focus on form and meaning relationships. The Interchange book tries to focus on meaning as the basis for the learning. This can be a sign of success for the selected textbooks, since one great objective of the book has been developing a communicative competence which is achieved by increasing comprehension of the language, and comprehending the language is necessary for paying attention to meaning. It is worth mentioning that the activities with focus on both the form and the meaning are a few in the selected textbook.

II. Turn taking

Turn taking refers to the type of participation that the learner must have when starting the learning task. The Interchange 3 book has tasks that usually expect the learners to respond (81%). Initiation receives the next greatest percentage in Interchange textbooks, with 14%. Moreover, the percentage of tasks which do not need the learners to start or answer is the least with 5%. These results indicate that the Interchange 3 tasks encourage the students to use the language and more importantly they require the students to express themselves rather than to be a listener. The results show that when the students have more chances to express themselves in English, they are more likely to learn it more effectively.

III. Mental Processes

When the language learners participate in a language learning task, they may be asked to go through different mental processes either to comprehend the language or to produce it. Much of the mental processes are likely to happen when a learner wants to comprehend or produce language. In this part of the task analysis 10 items of mental processes as shown in the following table. According to the table, the Interchange book has all of the ten mental operations in its tasks; however, there are differences regarding the percentage of each mental operation.

Table 1. Ten Items of Mental Processes

	Frequency	percentage
Retrieve from long-term memory	77	3%
Build text	360	15%
Draw on prior knowledge	288	11%
Relate sounds to objects	165	7%
Compare	376	9%
Decode semantic meaning	359	14%
Select information	431	17%
Repeat with expansion	69	3%
Deduce language rule	192	7%
Apply language rule	377	14%
Total	2529	100%

The mental processes 'retrieve from long term memory' are so low for the Interchange 3 (3%). It indicates that the textbook does not require students to remember items from the previous units. These items may be grammatical rules or some specific vocabularies which the student has learned in the previous units.

The tasks which need students to 'build text' (i.e. to produce the items of language which is longer than a sentence) are more frequent in the mental processes (15%). This shows that the Interchange series encourage the learners to produce meaningful language.

'Draw on their prior knowledge' has almost less percentage (11%) than in the 'build text' (15%). This shows that Interchange tries to make the new teaching issue relevant to the previous ones in that unit and also to the points which they have been learned in the previous units.

Tasks that require the students to make sounds relevant to objects contain only 7% of the activities in the Interchange 3. This shows that the activities which employ auditory and visual parts that give input to learners are not that much in the Interchange textbooks. This may be a disadvantage of the textbook since making use of all sensory parts of body in learning involves the students more actively in participating and also increases the variety of practices and finally the motivation of the students.

The amount of tasks that require learners to 'compare' language samples based on their form or meaning is a little more than the tasks which involved 'relating sounds to objects' (7% vs. 9%). The aim of tasks that involve comparison is to make students able to realize the differences between two sets of language parts including sounds, words, phrases, sentences, etc. in order to learn about their form or their function.

The percentage of the tasks that require learners to 'decode semantic meaning' is almost high in Interchange (14%) in comparison with other mental processes involved for the tasks. This mental process involves students in realizing different types of meaning of a text or in simpler words what the text wants to say directly.

The mental operation 'select information' is a mental process that is prompted when the students are asked to answer the reading comprehension questions while the answers are located in the passage. The size of this mental process is the highest among all of the mental processes in the task analysis (17%). This may be the result from the fact that each unit in the selected textbook contains an authentic reading text which is followed by reading comprehension questions, but the percentage could get higher by including exercises that ask students to express their opinions and general understanding.

The mental process 'repeat with expansion' contains only 3% percent of the mental operations in Interchange 3. This shows that tasks that give learners frames to produce language input are not so popular in this text book; because the number is the least among the other mental processes.

Tasks that involve students in 'deducing language rule' contain only 7% of the mental processes in Interchange 3. This result may show that the textbook is not consisted of an inductive approach toward teaching grammatical structures and other teaching issues.

The percentage of learning tasks that need the students to 'apply language rules' is simply 14% in the Interchange 3. Activities which involve this mental operation contain mostly the grammar exercises, which are presented in two Grammar Focus parts in each unit. However, this type of activities may not have any specific value; they don't appear to provide a meaningful context for the students because they only let the learners do some grammatical practices.

IV. Content

Another important part of a task in a textbook is the type of input that is given to the language learners as the basis to do the task. An important issue is the type of output that is expected from the students by the task, the source of the input that is given to them and the contents that affect as the basis of the task.

Results of the evaluations of this part are also showed in the following table. It is worth mentioning that the variety of these aspects of the tasks is an influential factor since it prevents boredom, and it lets the language learners with different learning styles and strategies to be active in the class.

As the table shows, the low percentage of 'graphic' input (15%) shows that we need more pictures, diagrams, photos, etc. in our textbooks as sources for providing visual aids for the language learners and also to make the textbook more attractive and enjoyable.

Similarly, the textbook specifies a little amount of 'oral words/phrases' input (12%) for the learners. Such tasks are of great importance since they have specific effect on the oral proficiency of the learners.

'Oral extended discourse' (6%) is another type of input which needs to be allocated more throughout the textbook since discourse can be considered as real-life situations which can make the learners familiar with such important notions.

The 'written words/phrases/sentences' (60%) have the highest percentage in the rank, and other types of input have percentages which are not comparable to the written input. Specially, it contradicts the low frequency of 'sound/music' (4%). It can be realized that rate and quality of the recorded audio need to be improved since auditory stimuli can have beneficial effects on language learners. Also, the results indicate that 'written words/phrases' and 'written extended discourse' are 60% and 3%. This shows that written input focuses on sentential level and not the paragraph level.

There are notable differences in the frequency of different types of input. This indicates that the selected textbook does not have variety for having different types of input for the learners. The enormous percentage of words and sentences that are shorter than discourse (60%) imply that oral and visual inputs should be paid more attention in the teaching content. This could be achieved by developing audio or audiovisual materials in the student's book.

Table 2. Six Items of Content

	Frequency	Percentage
Graphic	311	15%
Oral words/phrases	257	12%
Oral extended discourse	137	6%
Written words/phrases	1242	60%
Written extended discourse	52	3%
Sounds/music	62	4%
Total	2061	100%

V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

To restate the purpose of the present study, it can be pointed out that this paper's aim was to evaluate the efficiency of the new edition of the Interchange series as an English as a foreign language material for Iranian language learners by examining the book with a checklist. The main reason for doing such a research was that not so many studies have been done in evaluating the efficiency of these textbooks in language institutes in Iran. As Austin (1962) mentioned, it is effective in terms of helping Iranian learners of English to "do things with words".

As mentioned before, the results indicated that meaning and form were affectively included in interrelated parts in the textbook, and the activities are planned according to this feature. Initiation is the next strength point of the textbook since it paid special attention to tasks that mostly expect the learners to respond. According to the mental processes section, retrieving from long term memory and repetition with expansion were considered as less important abilities and not enough tasks have been included in order to improve them; on the other hand, a great deal of tasks have been specified to producing meaningful language, realizing different types of meaning of a text, prompting the students to answer the reading comprehension questions and involving the students in grammar exercises.

Regarding the content, the textbook suffers from the low frequency of sound and written extended discourse. In other words, the rate of sound and written input on the paragraph level need to be improved. However, the high frequency of written words, phrases and sentences are significant. The researchers believe that the findings of the present study will be helpful to find an appropriate result for evaluating textbooks. Findings of this study might also help New Interchange authors realize the success of their course books in providing the learners who belong to variety of cultures, including Iranian learners of English, with adequate input to deal with different communication purposes.

Thus, the present study simply investigated effectiveness of the new edition of the Interchange series through a single checklist. This study can be expanded by comparing different type of competences of those language learners who pass the new edition of the Interchange series. Taking into account of other factors such as gender, age, or teachers can help the researchers to discover whether there is a relationship between different types of competences of those language learners who pass the whole series as their course book.

There are a variety numbers of frameworks and checklists for textbook evaluation and each of them evaluate the selected textbook based on a number of theories and ideas. Therefore, the results may have been different if it had used other frameworks and checklists. There is also a limitation in the fact that the number of

participants (i.e. the teachers) in the research was 10. It is certain that studies with larger numbers of participants will gain more reliable results. There is also a limitation in collecting the data since they do not have time limit, and participants can change their answers. As a result, the answers may vary from what participants really think.

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